



# Bush meets with LI families of soldiers killed in Iraq

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Joshua Goldfeder-Fletcher is only 10, but he's old enough to know the pain of war. His brother, Jacob Fletcher, died in one last year.



And Thursday, because of that, Joshua met President George W. Bush. "I gave him a picture of Jake," Joshua said afterward, recalling how "exciting" it was to meet the president. "I said, 'This is for you'."

Joshua's father, Marlowe Fletcher, also had something for the president: a pair of his slain son's paratroopers wings, which he said later he pinned on the president's chest.

"He kept telling us it was his honor," said Fletcher, of Island Park. "He's a regular guy. There was no phoniness about him. He got a little teary-eyed while he was with us."

Cathy Heigher, of Bay Shore, also had a present for the president as he spent a few private moments Thursday with relatives of Long Islanders killed in Iraq. Heigher, whose son Raheen died in July, gave Bush a letter asking him to consider providing more life insurance for the families of soldiers who die in the line of duty.

Heigher, who was accompanied by her surviving son, Glynn, 28, said the president promised to respond to her request.

"He said he would never forget my son," said Heigher. "He also shared with me the fact that our soldiers were there to protect us."

The president's visit to the Island came as the families have searched for ways to move forward with their lives, even as they cling to memories of lives snuffed out too soon.

Pfc. Fletcher was killed along with a fellow soldier Nov. 13, when their bus was struck by a bomb in Samara, Iraq.

Heigher, 22, also a private first class, was killed July 24 when a convoy he was riding in came under enemy fire. His mother said Thursday he received a posthumous promotion to corporal.

Since her son's death, Cathy Heigher has become a vocal advocate for increased government support for soldiers and veterans.

In November, she helped persuade Democratic Rep. Steve Israel to introduce H.R. 3436 - the Raheen Tyson Heigher Life Insurance for America's Troops Act -- which would require the government to provide \$100,000 in life insurance coverage for soldiers. The bill, whose sole Republican co-sponsor is Rep. Peter King, is in committee.

"I have spent the year focusing on what I need to do to turn my son's death from a negative to a positive, and that's been to speak out on veteran's affairs," said Heigher, owner of the Beyond Images of Beauty salon, in Bay Shore. "I don't think their concerns are being addressed, and I think our government can do a better job in meeting their needs."

She has also urged greater government aid to higher education, saying the weak economy and high tuition costs are forcing many young people to depend on the armed forces as a low-cost source of job training and college tuition.

"I think the average 17-, 18-, 19-year-old doesn't know what they are signing their lives away to," said Heigher, who said she had chased off a recruiter who approached her son when he was in high school. "And recruiters will say whatever it takes to get a soldier to sign up for the military."

She is also collecting money to provide small college stipends for Bay Shore and Brentwood high school student who will graduate this year.

"I think my strength comes from knowing I am doing something in his honor," Heigher said.

Fletcher's mother, Dorine Kenney, of Bay Shore, declined her invitation to meet Bush Thursday, saying friends, work and a project she has started provide the serenity she seeks.

She spends hours on the phone with Marcella Rae Minucci, the Pennsylvania mother of Sgt. Joseph Minucci II, who was sitting next to Fletcher when a bomb killed them both. She often re-reads her son's letters, which she keeps in a lidded brown box in her living room, not far from the photograph of her soldier son standing proudly before an American flag.

Staff Writer Joseph Mallia contributed to this story.

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